

Parlez-Vous Français?

A controversy over English store logos in French-speaking Quebec hints at broader cultural issues in Canada **BY PATRICIA SMITH**

The Southern gentleman with the string tie above the entrance to a fast-food restaurant in Quebec is immediately recognizable to almost any American. But the name on the sign, PFK, might be more of a puzzle.

PFK stands for *Poulet Frit Kentucky*—or, as it's known in the U.S. and most places around the world, Kentucky Fried Chicken. KFC is an exception among American companies in Quebec in that it has translated its name into French.

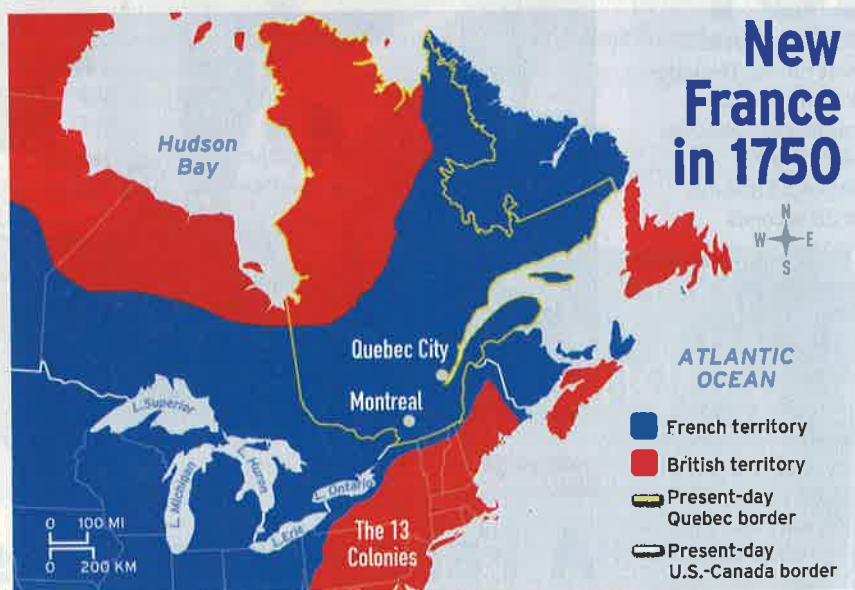
But it may soon have more company. After decades of permitting a wide variety of English-language trade names on signs, the government in French-speaking Quebec is now insisting that stores and restaurants add French phrases or translations—or face fines or legal action.

It's the latest skirmish in a 300-year battle over Canada's cultural heritage. Quebec—the only one of Canada's 10 provinces that is predominantly French-speaking—has long been a flashpoint. In the rest of Canada, both English and French are official languages. But Quebec made French its sole official language in 1977, and Quebec law requires stores to serve customers in French and post in-store displays and labels in French.

The current crackdown on signs has prompted six major American retailers to take Quebec's government to court. The companies—Walmart, Costco, Best Buy,



Waving the Quebec flag to celebrate a provincial holiday (above); a PFK in Quebec City



the Gap, Old Navy, and Guess—say the province is unfairly changing the rules without formally changing the law.

The stores object to the cost of redesigning signs and also want to maintain worldwide consistency in their brands,

says Nathalie St.-Pierre of the Retail Council of Canada, a group that represents stores.

"Our members in general feel that this is very unfair," says St.-Pierre.

Quebec's language agency admits

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that the province has until now “tolerated” signs containing nothing but trademarked English names. But an influx of U.S. retailers led the agency to take a tougher line recently.

Why so much hullabaloo over a few store signs? It has to do with Quebec’s unique history within Canada.

“Every time there’s a tussle over language, it touches a very sensitive chord,” says Andrew Holman, a professor of Canadian studies at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts. “It’s immediately interpreted as a symbol of a bigger threat that Quebecers have always faced.”

‘New France’

French settlement in North America began in 1541—almost 70 years before the British established the Jamestown colony in Virginia in 1607. Over the next two centuries, a power struggle emerged between New France, as the French colonies in North America were known, and the growing British colonies in North America (see map). The conflict came to a head in 1759, when the British defeated the French in a key battle during the French and Indian War (1754-1763).

Quebecers call the British victory “the conquest,” and it signaled the end of New France. But it wasn’t the end of French cultural influence in Quebec: In 1774, the British passed a law protecting the right of Quebec’s French Catholic settlers to speak French and practice their religion.

While French culture remained in Quebec, it was surrounded by a growing



sea of English-speaking Canadians and Americans to the south. Starting in 1776, the American Revolution sent British loyalists fleeing north. In the 19th century, increasing numbers of immigrants from England, Scotland, and Ireland arrived in

Canada. By 1900, about three quarters of Canadians used English in government, business, and daily life.

In the 1960s, Quebec nationalism began to surface. In 1976, a separatist party called Parti Québécois (PQ) came to power in Quebec. A year later, Quebec’s legislature made French the province’s sole official language.

The separatist PQ has held power for 19 of the last 37 years. During those years, the PQ supported many pro-French measures including two referendums on Quebec becoming independent—in 1980 and in 1995—both of which were narrowly defeated. Last September, the PQ returned to power—thanks in part to young activists like Marjolaine Arpin of Montreal, who supports independence for Quebec.

“We’re so different from the rest of Canada, not only for the language, but the values, the principles, the type of society we want,” Arpin told the BBC.

Holman, the Canada expert, says the current commotion over store signs is really about the desire to protect French culture on a mostly English-speaking continent. Looking at a Walmart or Old Navy sign, many Quebecers see a larger threat.

“In the minds of the Quebec nationalists, it’s the Redcoats conquering us all over again,” he says. “The argument is essentially, if you allow your culture to be erased by globalization, you can’t get it back.” •

With reporting by Ian Austen, who covers Canada for The New York Times.